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Ubuntu and Social Capital: a Strong Relationship and a Possible Instrument for Socio-economic Development

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Abstract
I examine the interrelationships between social capital and Ubuntu, an African social philosophy necessarily embedding the existence of an individual in that of the society. Social capital – the sum of interpersonal links and civic participation of a person – has been proven to be essential in promoting both social and economic development. The strong link existing between Ubuntu and social capital shows the potential value of the former for the socio-economic development of the sub-Saharan populations. Indeed the African governments should promote Ubuntu as a valuable instrument to fight against poverty and conflicts.

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1. Introduction

The isiXhosa\textsuperscript{1} word \textit{Ubuntu} identifies a social philosophy (van Binsbergen, 2001) at the basis of the idea of community and society in sub-Saharan Africa. Its literal meaning is “humanness to others” (Gianan, 2010), while others (du Toit, 2004) translate it as “I am only because we are, and since we are, I am” (p.33), or still “a person is a person through other persons” (Shutte, 1993: 46) and entails necessarily reciprocal interactions of individuals with each other which “render us human” (Tutu, 1999). \textit{Ubuntu} thus implies that each person exists because the others do, and then the necessary interaction between people involves mutuality and cooperation, to the extent that the others’ lives are the one’s life. The idea and the sense of community which grounds on \textit{Ubuntu} are therefore extremely strong: each individual can exist only within a community and hence the survival of the one’s community is his survival. \textit{Ubuntu} suggests the members of a community to adopt a we-thinking attitude instead of an individualistic-thinking; but this is still not enough to fully understand the relevance of the concept. As the individual and the community are intimately and inextricably linked and there is no clear separation between the two, while in the common sense of an individualistic approach the idea of community represents something exterior to each of its members (i.e., in a sense, a super-structure from the individual’s point of view), within the \textit{Ubuntu} view it is both interior and exterior to each member. While an individualistic person may still continue existing outside any community (i.e. an individual can be self-sufficient, although this is an extreme case), this possibility does not exist within the \textit{Ubuntu} world. Furthermore, while in this world a community could still continue existing if one or some of its members leave it, it would anyway be damaged, lose something, because of these leavings. The utilitarian, impersonal and individualistic market of the traditional neoclassical economics would not: if some agent decides to leave this market, then it is because he was not getting any advantage from staying in, and he is better (or indifferent between being) outside than

\textsuperscript{1} A language of the Bantu family.
(or) inside. One may argue that *Ubuntu* implies a collectivist society. However, this conclusion is not correct, as it would underestimate the complexity of the concept and would mislead our reasoning. As I will stress further in this article, *Ubuntu* incorporates and values individualism, in a context of mediation between the individuals (Louw, 2002 and Vogt and Laher, 2009).

Although its origins date very back in the African history, *Ubuntu* and, in particular, its economic implications have not been widely studied so far. Only in the South African Republic\(^2\) this philosophy has been accounted for at an official level, for example in economic programming at national level (Mbeki, 2007). The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of *Ubuntu* in the current economic thought through showing that the concept of social capital and the African *Ubuntu* are strictly connected to each other, and represent fundamental engines for the human and economic development. Social capital can be defined as the sum of interpersonal relationships and individual has plus his engagement in the civil life (such as through participation to elections and referenda. This issue will be presented and discussed more in detail in the following of the paper; here I am only sketching the argumentation and the motivation. I will also provide evidence from the literature that social capital has a positive impact on several economic and social outcomes.

The main reason why *Ubuntu* should have full citizenship in economics will be clear at the end of the paper, but let me discuss this point preliminarily here. The *Ubuntu* philosophy is common to the majority of the sub-Saharan cultures, which are currently living in economic distress and in countries, where an even distribution of the resources and a sustained economic growth are far from being a reality. This does not mean that *Ubuntu* might be a *panacea* for these problems; if it were, sub-Saharan Africa would not be in its current situation. However what I

\(^2\) Actually also Ms. Elizabeth Frawley Bagley (U.S. Special Representative at the Global Partnership Initiative) mentioned *Ubuntu* as an important element of the U.S. foreign policy ([www.state.gov/s/partnerships/125074.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/partnerships/125074.htm)) in her speech of June 18\(^{th}\) 2009.
claim is that this social philosophy could help solving these problems if correctly understood, enhanced by *ad hoc* policies and instrumentally used in the economic policies.

Few works exist on the importance of *Ubuntu* in economics and development; however all of them agree on the positive impact of the first on the second. Breier and Visser (2006) show how the presence of *Ubuntu* and of social capital has a positive effect on the community-based provision of essential services in rural South-Africa. Gathiram (2008) highlights the importance of *Ubuntu* “to achieve equalisation of opportunities and the economic development of physically disabled people”3 in South Africa. Greenstein (2009) reaches similar conclusions, valid for the social and economic development of the country in general. Ncube (2010) presents *Ubuntu* as a leadership philosophy and concludes that it enhances collectivism, which in turn promotes team-working, solidarity and loyalty in human relationships. Wanasika et al. (2011) find that “*Ubuntu* was reflected in high levels of group solidarity, paternalistic leadership, and Human Oriented leadership.”4 Engelbrecht (2008) finds that the communities with a strong *Ubuntu* are more successful in positively responding to the public programmes of development; and moreover the members of these communities are less likely to be drug or alcohol addicted. Last but not least Lenka Bula (2008) asserts that *Ubuntu* represents a vital and vibrant economically viable principle for the development of a society.

In this article I aim at comparing the main characteristics of *Ubuntu* with those of social capital, a complex set of interpersonal relationships and ties at different levels and with different strengths that have been shown to affect economic and social outcomes. A precise definition of social capital, a multifaceted concept, is much more difficult than that of *Ubuntu*. For this reason in this introduction I leave the reader with this broad definition, which will be developed further.

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in the paper. In section 2 I trace a (somehow backward-looking) path from the concept of *homo oeconomicus* used in the classical economics literature to that (wider) of *homo politicus*, whose roots date back to the philosophers of ancient Greece, or, perhaps, even earlier. This section serves to clarify how and why *Ubuntu* and social capital are useful concepts in the process of economic development today. Section 3 develops the concept of social capital and highlights the relationship between it and economic outcomes. Similarities and differences between *Ubuntu* and social capital are then discussed in section 4. Finally, section 5 presents the main conclusions of this article and suggests some possible policy implications.

2. From *homo oeconomicus* to *homo politicus*

The *homo oeconomicus*, an economic agent who decides and acts only on the basis of his own self-interest has dominated the economic theory for decades. It is common wisdom that its creator was Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, where he states that it is not because of their benevolence that the butcher and the brewer will provide us with our dinner today, but because we pay for the goods that they sell to us, and we give them enough money for the exchange to be advantageous for both them and us. Positing that all the agents in a given market act equally in that way, the economic theory shortly concludes that the existence of markets rests on the self-interest of the agents and on the mutual advantages created by the exchanges between them. In other words, in an efficient market all the exchanges that are mutually advantageous for at least two subjects will take place. It is worthy to notice that the notion of “advantage” is restricted to the materialistic sphere: usually the economists translate the concept of “advantage” with that of “utility” (Mas-Colell et al., 1995), which is easy to include in theoretical formalised models of choice and welfare. Moreover, all the agents in the market act singularly and individualistically: the market is a community defined by and based on utilitarianism only: a collection of individuals who interact with each other for the only purpose of maximising their utility. However, neither social capital nor *Ubuntu* entail collectivist society
in the socialist or communist sense; rather they work in individualistic societies and are at work to compensate excesses of individualism. Metaphorically (and paradoxically) one might say that they embed the community in the individual, though following two partially different paths.

The “economic man”, however, has been widely criticised during the last years, and the number of critics is still growing. The reason is that the predictions of the theoretical models based on the *homo oeconomicus* are more and more disproved by the empirical observation. In particular, the growing number of experiments in economics has provided more and more evidence against that traditional view (Camerer, 2003). Furthermore, these results tend also to be in contrast with the atomistic conception of market: in several situations the subjects abandon their individual rationality and adopt the so-called “we-rationality” (Gilbert, 1989; Hurley, 1989; Sugden, 1993 and Tuomela, 1995). So, for instance, Rabin (1993) Fehr and Schmidt (1999) and Bolton and Ockenfels (2000) have introduced fairness and reciprocity into their models. However one might still argue that both fairness and reciprocity are consistent with a traditional *homo oeconomicus*: since fairness and reciprocity facilitate the economic exchanges, then it is in the interest of any agent to behave accordingly, even if Fehr and Gächter (1998) oppose the *homo reciprocans* to the *homo oeconomicus*, claming that the two are different. Perhaps far from reciprocity another emotional attitude has emerged in the economics literature: trust. Bruni and Sugden (2000) state indeed that “It is a truism that a market economy cannot function without trust. We must be able to rely on other people to respect our property rights, and on our trading partners to keep their promises.” (p. 21). However here we are still in the framework of the individual rationality: as Hollis (1998) points out trust is still individually rational in economic exchanges.

The we-thinking (or we-rationality) considers groups of people as individual agents: a set of individuals constitute a collective agent, which acts as an individual. For this to be feasible, each member of the group must recognize himself as a part of the collective agent, and all its
components should be mutually aware – at least to a certain extent (Bruni and Sugden, 2000) – of this recognition. Tuomela (2007) and Hakli et al. (2010) distinguish two types of “we-reasoning”: the “we-mode reasoning” and the “pro-group I-mode reasoning”. The first is team reasoning, in the sense that each member of the group reasons within and for the group, taken as a collective unique agent. The second is the case in which each member of the group keeps his individuality and his reasoning, but adopts the preferences of the group. It is important to notice that, although the two modes may appear similar, they differ on one fundamental aspect: the basic unit of the reasoning. While the I-mode presupposes that every member of the group adapts his preferences to that of the group, and then acts accordingly, the we-mode does not allow for multiple conformed choices, but presupposes the existence of only one choice, that of the group, because all of its members share the same goal, which coincides with that of the group. In the first case each member can have his goals, but makes the group’s to prevail on his, in the second case the individual goals merge within a unique goal shared by all the members of the group. It is important to stress that this does not mean that the individual is no longer important. Each person contributes to reaching the common goal and this contribution is fundamental from the social point of view. Individuality persists in all the we-thinking forms: each individual brings his experience, abilities, knowledge, strategies, etc. to the common discussion and to the final social goal. Given that each person is a member of the society, the disclosure and the consideration of all the individual contributions is the only way to reach the best decision for the society. We-thinking does not wipe out individuality; rather it requires people to abandon egoism.

Sugden (2002) discusses also the role of sympathy and empathy and argues that “sympathy is revealed in an individual’s actual choices, and so is a property of subjective preferences. Empathy impacts only on ethical preferences.” Here the concepts of “subjective preferences”

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5 The notion of we-reasoning used here is the same as that of “team reasoning” in Bacharach (1999 and 2006). For more details on this similarity, see also Hakli et al. (2010).
and of “ethical preferences” are to be interpreted in the sense of Harsany (1955): the former are
the preferences revealed in the actual choices of an individual, while the latter are his “judgements
about the welfare of the community as a whole.”\textsuperscript{7} A “sympathetic person” is somebody whose
choices pursue not only the self-interest, but also that of the other members of the group.
“Empathic” is who includes also the welfare of the community in the reasoning leading to his
choices. The two concepts are similar, but different in timing: the ethical preferences must precede
the subjective. In addition while the former can influence the latter, the \textit{vice-versa} is impossible
or, better, almost irrelevant, as the ethical preferences are derived from the social norms of the
community, while the individual preferences represent mainly the individual’s tastes. This entails
that \textit{Ubuntu} involves both: on the one hand who lives accordingly to the \textit{Ubuntu} philosophy is
empathic, as the welfare of the community where he lives is his welfare; on the other hand, and
precisely because of the empathy he feels, the individual will necessarily behave sympathetically
when taking his choices.

Going back to Aristotle’s definition of the man as a “political animal”\textsuperscript{8}, I would define the
man who adopts either of the two forms of we-reasoning as \textit{homo politicus}, i.e. a man who is
embedded in a community and who needs it to exists, as well as the community needs him to
survive. This is a new \textit{homo} with respect to the \textit{oeconomicus}: the latter exists independently of
any social super-structure and uses the market (the very only super-structure allowed by the neo-
classical economics) to maximise his utility. The \textit{homo politicus} is one who can not disentangle
completely himself and the community where he lives, and therefore must act for its interest. One
might argue that this does not rule out individual egoism: if the political man exists only because
the community exists, then he will act accordingly with the community’s interests to guarantee
his own survival. This is undoubtedly true in the case of I-mode reasoning, although it is not

\textsuperscript{7} Sugden (2002), p. 67.
\textsuperscript{8} On the contribution of the Aristotelian philosophy to economics and on the related interconnections between economy
and community, see van Staveren (2001).
necessarily the only cause of the individual’s behaviour; however in the case of the we-mode reasoning, given that each individual abandons personal goals that contrast with the social, individual egoism in the sense mentioned above is absent by default⁹.

Political (and economic) institutions and organisations are generally hierarchical, i.e. the decisional process usually entails different decisional levels and different responsibilities. The necessity and the existence of a leadership is an apparent critical point of *Ubuntu*. Then, how is the we-thinking of this African philosophy linked to leadership and hierarchy in the society? *Ubuntu* is a democratic way to decision making, where leaders exist, but where their role is more complex than in the Eurocentric visions of leadership. In an *Ubuntu* society the leader’s role is more similar to that of a mediator in the western culture than to the concept of chief in the same culture. The first task of the leader who follows the *Ubuntu* is to understand the we-thinking by the means of talks with the other members of the society. Only afterwards, s/he can formulate a syncretic decision that represents the we-thinking (i.e. what the community deems “good”). In this sense the *Ubuntu* leadership is “inclusive” and based on consensus, in contrast with the Eurocentric concept of “exclusive” leadership based on individual responsibility (Muwanga-Zake, 2009 and Ncube, 2010). This dynamic (and democratic) process that leads to formulate a syncretic decision entails that what is “good” for the society is decided through discussion, comparison of different points of view. Of course, in this process traditions, superstitions, ancestral cultural heritages (in short, the ethical values of the group) may play a role. Nevertheless, this is true for any society, and the social evolution has slowly decreased the importance of “old” values, to the advantage of the “new”. There is no reason to believe that the African populations will not follow the same path. In conclusion, the concepts of what is “good”

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⁹ By the way, it could be argued that the subject which acts accordingly to individual egoism is now the group self.
for the group, of “humanness” and, more in general, the ethical principles of the group are a matter rather of dynamics than of statics, and, as such, it is not possible to define them precisely a priori.

Notably, several management models in Africa are successfully based on this social philosophy (Wanasika et al., 2001; van der Colff, 2003), showing that we-thinking and leadership are not only non-contrasting, but they are complementary. Managerial models based on Ubuntu are a practical example of applications of this social philosophy. Some details on case studies may help to better understanding the social relevance of Ubuntu in African cultures. Shumba (2011) shows that Ubuntu values promote a responsible and sustainable use of natural resources. Indeed, the values of this African social philosophy highlight the preeminence of the society over the individual. Natural resources are common goods, and agents who maximise individual payoffs would exploit such goods too much (as the tragedy of the commons shows). Instead, the community values promoted by Ubuntu do not lead to a tragic outcome; rather, thanks to the Ubuntu principles, common gods are managed with “ecological intelligence”.

Muller at al. (2012) analyse two models to achieve socially sustainable business practices in the fruit industry. The authors compare a model based on unilateral paternalistic system (where the managers of the company prescribe the behaviour to be followed) to a participative approach based on Ubuntu (where working conditions are discussed and agreed by all the actors) over a three-year period. They conclude that the second model is more successful in achieving the desired results than the first. According to the authors this outcome is the direct consequence of the Ubuntu values: paternalistic prescriptions are not always the best for a community and the members of this one may not follow these prescriptions, as they are felt as an authoritative imposition. Instead, shared decisions are more binding for the individuals who took them and represent better the preferences of the community.

Senooane (2014) analyses CSR of a mobile phone service provider in South Africa. Her study has two main conclusions: the first is that, in line with Ubuntu, South African customers
believe that firms must be socially responsible. The second conclusion is that the interviewed customers of the company think that its CSR should be inspired by *Ubuntu*. The way in which this philosophy is operationalised is the participation of all the involved agents in the decision process. This participatory decisional process follows a sort of direct democracy, as the involved agents discuss and decide on a horizontal basis, i.e. the contribution of each agent to the discussion does not mirror the agent’s hierarchical position in the social organisation. In this respect, *Ubuntu* is very close to a system based on weak ties *à la* Granovetter.

Besides the examples cited just before, as any social philosophy, also *Ubuntu* needs endorsing by political and public authorities to work. Institutional settings, governmental acts, laws, etc. may conform to (or at least comply with) the values expressed by *Ubuntu*, as it happens in the South African constitution and in the Zimbabwean *Code of Ethics of Social Workers* (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). However, the same institutions may refer to paradigms that are far from the values of *Ubuntu*. The recent marketization of the South African society is an example of this (McDonald, 2010). *Ubuntu* exists in the sub-Saharan African cultures, but it needs enhancing and promoting. While non-governmental groups may successfully pursue this goal, official political endorsement is almost necessary.

That described above is the theoretical framework in which I will discuss the *Ubuntu* social philosophy, its relevance for economics and its relationship with social capital.

3. Social Capital, Trust and Economics

Social capital is a multifaceted concept, which may be defined as the set of interpersonal and social ties that link the members of a society. This broad definition is suggested by Putnam (1993), although not exactly in these terms. Putnam (1993) includes both the memberships to voluntary associations and the participation to political life (through voting at elections and referenda) in social capital.
Fundamental glue for a community to exist and survive (either when its members reason accordingly with the I-mode or the we-mode) is (generalised)\textsuperscript{10} trust. Indeed when each component of the group decides in accordance with and for the group’s goals, he must rely on the others to do the same. Either when the decision is taken collectively and instantaneously or not (or the others’ choice is discovered only at the end of the decisional process, after the choices of all are made), the survival of the group (i.e. the conformation of each member to the necessary reasoning mode – either I or we) crucially depends on the fact that each member trusts all the others, in the sense that each component of the group believes that all the others will act in the same way as he. The defection of a component would have disrupting effects on the (supposedly) shared goal of the group.

Granovetter (1985) and Putnam (1993 and 2000) represent a milestone in the understanding of the relationships between social capital and trust. Since then the economic literature has shown a great interest for the issue and a number of works have been published (for a review, see Durlauf and Fafchamps, 2005)\textsuperscript{11}. Although no convergence has been achieved on a unique definition of social capital (Lin, 2000 and Streeten, 2000), and although different scholars use different operational measurements, all agree that trust and social capital are strongly linked (Carpenter et al., 2004), some claiming that the latter causes the former, others leaving the question open to further research. Besides this dispute, all the scholars tend to assess the level of trust of a given group through the stock of social capital of its members: the larger the latter, the higher the level of the former – some studies in economics (Guiso et al., 2004; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005 and Migheli, 2012) have provided additional support to this approach. More specifically, in each group, a member gains good reputation and benefits from it; “[this] reputation [either good or bad] is transmitted along the links in the network by virtue of the transitivity of

\textsuperscript{10} On the concept of “generalized trust” see for example Freitag and Traummüller (2009). Basically it refers to the trust that a person has in a stranger. However I will claim that also relational trust play a crucial role in the society.

\textsuperscript{11} However the concept is not new in economics and already Smith ([1759] 1976) had dealt with it as well as other European social philosophers (Bruni and Sugden, 2000).
As a partial conclusion of the previous discussion, we can argue that social capital is crucial for the survival of any social group and that we can rely on its presence to assess the level of trust between the members of a community. Social capital also engenders relational trust, i.e. the trust that individuals develop between each other as the consequence of a personal relationship between them (Hyypää, 2010). On the one hand this relational trust may derive from social capital grounded on weak or on strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). In the former case, the effects of this social capital may be (and in general are) disruptive for the society. In the latter case, the bridging social capital fosters positive development. On the other hand the type of social capital on which I am going to base my further discussion is that of good type, while both generalised and relational trusts are relevant for the discussion that follows.

At this point we can understand the link between we-thinking and social capital, which “broadly refers to the system of networks, norms and trust relationships that enable communities to address common concerns.” More “economically” Lin (2000) defines social capital as the resources embedded in a network that can be accessed by the members of the network in order to gain a benefit. There are several cases in economics, in which this benefit is not individual, but rather mutual, as it is the case for the groups of (female) borrowers of the Grameen Bank (Yunus, 2003). Here I consider “network” as synonymous of group. This may appear as a strong and arbitrary choice. However the terminology derived from the network analysis may appear reductionist, in the sense of losing the generality of theory by collapsing in techniques. But this is not the case when we consider groups of people linked to each other by social capital. In such a case the network simply reveals that the members of a group are interconnected to each other similarly to the nodes of a network. To avoid ambiguity, however, in what follows I will not use

\[\text{trust}^{12}\]

\[\text{Bruni and Sugden (2000), p. 23.}\]

\[\text{Pronyk et al. (2008), p. 1560.}\]

\[\text{This is a particular case of microfinance, where the borrowers are a group of people (generally women): there are no physical collaterals, as the individual reputation within the group works as it.}\]
“person, member or people” instead of “node/nodes” to remind the reader that I am not reducing the discussion to network techniques. I will anyway refer to groups of people interconnected by social capital as “networks” to synthesise this concept in a word and to recall the idea of interpersonal links. Social capital grounds on mutual acquaintance between the members, and the resources embedded in it “are constituted by the mutual control of the group on its members and by the derived trustworthiness, which in turn gives access to credit.” 

Since the success of the common project and the survival of the group are subject to the full cooperation of all its members, these must trust each other and reason in accordance with the group’s goal. That is the members of the community must adopt we-reasoning. It is important to notice here that trust depends on the strength of the ties among the members of the community. This holds because the stronger a tie, the stronger the (moral) retaliation power of a member on another. Hence cooperation to the achievement of the mutual goal is strongly enhanced by the social capital of the network, which, in turn, guarantees the trustworthiness of the members of the community and a stable level of mutual trust. Consistently with this, Thöni et al. (2012) run an experiment and show that social capital generates trust and that this fosters cooperation in large groups. Furthermore, Stolle and Harell (2013) provide evidence that social capital minimises the sense of diversity between people of different races and enhances generalised trust among young Canadians. Gundelach and Traunmüller (2014) show that social capital facilitates the integration of immigrants and minority racial groups in Germany.

Now, all the social groups exist because their members share some common goal (either vital or not), whose achievement depends crucially on how much the members trust each other and are able to coordinate their actions and choices. Trust is enhanced by the strength of the ties which link the components of the group, and in turn this strength can be viewed as (a part of) the

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social capital embedded in the network. Therefore we can conclude that the larger the endowment of social capital of a community, the higher the probability that its members rea son for achieving the common goals.

Putnam (1993) categorises also a “political type” of social capital (identified with participation to elections and referendums), which will be particularly useful in the following of the paper. This type of social capital deserves particular attention in the framework of this article. As van Staveren and Knorringa (2007 and 2008) point out, social capital is a social phenomenon that originates at individual level. However, the real power of social capital, and its ability to change the society ground on its social dimension. This is easy to understand: social capital does not exist at individual level, since it originates from interpersonal relationships and ties, also at its political level. In particular, in this case each individual feels part of a community of other people, to whom s/he is linked through participating to the management of the community (region, country, etc.). In this sense social capital is a “microfunded macrophenomenon”.

Even in the impersonal neo-classical market social capital and trust play a crucial role (Shapiro, 1987; North, 1990 and Bruni and Sugden, 2008). A number of studies provide relevant evidence for the positive influence of social capital on economic and social development. Knack and Keefer (1997) and Zack and Knack (2001) empirically show that the endowment of social capital of a country fosters economic growth, investments and GDP; moreover areas that are locally rich in social capital have known faster industrialisation and have lower unemployment rates than areas where social capital is scarce (Durlauf and Fafchamps, 2005). In developing countries (India for example), social capital easies access to credit (Harris-White, 2003 and Yunus, 2003), allowing the households rich in social capital to develop economically (and socially). Here social capital works as a sort of immaterial collateral: people who would not refund the loan, would incur in social sanctions: blame by their peers in their network, or even exclusion from the network itself. Social capital is also responsible for financial development (Guiso et al.,
2004 and Karlan, 2005); it increases international trade (Guiso et al., 2009) as a consequence of the ties between and within businessmen and politicians. Another field where social capital has been found relevant to prompt development is innovation (Akçomak and Weel, 2009): the network of scientists, engineers and researchers and their movements between firms enhance the innovative processes and transfer knowledge between the members of the group. Social capital has also been found to exert positive effects on the monetary circulation (Skaggs, 1998), and this is why also a neo-classical market would not work without social capital. Indeed money (especially that used today) has a strong fiduciary component: the intrinsic value of coins and banknotes is clearly inferior than the facial value. Nevertheless we all give them a purchase power equal to the facial value, because we know that the others will do the same. This is a form of interpersonal (or generalised) trust, enhanced by social capital. A trait common to all these aspects is trust: the bridging social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Sabatini, 2009, and further in this article) generates, promotes and sustains interpersonal trust (Migheli, 2012), which is one of the most important lubricants for the economy (Arrow, 1974). Generalised and relational trust (and therefore social capital) decreases transaction costs and fastens the diffusion of information. Along these ways, social capital (and generalised trust) contribute to the economic and social development of a society. However, an excess of trust may also affect the economic outcomes negatively: Portes (2014) show that, when generalised trust engenders overreliance, people become sitting ducks for cheaters.

4. Social Capital and Ubuntu

Maluccio et al. (1999) show that social capital in South Africa has a positive payoff in terms of individual income, and link social capital to Ubuntu. Fourie and Schoeman (2010) establish a clear positive link between Ubuntu and efficient local governance in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province of the South-African Republic. This is relevant, as Putnam (1993) had already established a similar relationship between the level of social capital in the Italian regions and the
quality of their local governments. Thus Fourie and Schoeman (2010) allow the establishment of
the parallelism between Ubuntu and social capital that follows. Franken et al. (2009) find that the
social ties present in a community strengthen the monitoring on the behaviour of local public
officers, decreasing the capture of public funds. The monitoring is effective thanks to the fact that
the people feel to be part of the community and understand that they, as a community, would
benefit from the public funds available. The sense of community is generated and maintained by
the ties between its members; perhaps we could argue that the community itself is the set of ties
which link the members. Now, from the previous sections we know that 1) Ubuntu is at the basis
of the sense of community in sub-Saharan societies and 2) that social capital is constituted by the
interpersonal ties which link people to each other and by the individual involvement in social
activities (Migheli, 2011).

The strength of the ties entailed by social capital opens a new critical aspect of our
discourse. Strong ties (Granovetter, 1973 and 1985) bound people to each other in a way that can
engender perverse effects (Sobel, 2002). Mafia is an example of how strong ties may support a
disruptive institution funded on ties that are typical of social capital (Nooteboom, 2007). Indeed,
each mafia’s clan produces and re-produces social capital between its members. If the strength of
the ties is exacerbated, the consequences in economic and social terms are thus disruptive and
negative (Woolcock, 1998 and 2001), since they promote the élites’ fragmented interests that
often clash against each other, slowing down the virtuous economic and social processes. Sabatini
(2009) shows that bridging social capital (funded on weak ties) has positive consequences on the
economic development of Italian regions, whilst bonding social capital (i.e. that characterised by
strong ties) has an opposite effect. Evidently, in the case of mafia, the inter-group trust (i.e. that
between the mafia men) engenders distrust outside the network: people who are not connected
with mafia realise that it is bad for the society and mistrust the members of the mafia. However,
since a stranger may be linked to mafia or not (and individuals do not have any sure information
of this), the presence of negative social capital (that based on strong ties) is likely to decrease the level of generalised trust in the population.

The we-thinking implied by *Ubuntu* may well generate strong social ties, as long as the members of a community strongly identify with this, and perceive the other communities as stranger and, to some extent, hostile. In other words, one might argue that tribes and ethничal groups work as the mafia’s clans, and that the social capital and the ties within each group are used to increase the internal welfare and to disrupt the others’. Fortunately, this is hardly true for *Ubuntu*: this social philosophy is indeed shared by the vast majority of the sub-Saharan populations, and its inclusive power goes beyond ethnic and tribal borders (Barolsky, 2012 and Rapatsa, 2014). There is indeed no evidence that the application of *Ubuntu* had historically fostered ethnic or tribal conflicts; on the contrary there is evidence of the opposite so, that the values derived from *Ubuntu* have been used as a main pillar to appease ethnic conflicts in Burundi (Spitzer et al., 2014).

However, also the definition of “group” goes beyond ethnic and tribal borders, in the sense that social groups may take other forms and build other borders than those cited. The active discrimination of women in several domains of the everyday life is an example, which is particularly evident in developing countries, such as the African countries. The ties typical of social capital may be (even at different levels of consciousness) used by the dominant male incumbents to exclude the potential female participation to – for example – the labour market. Also in this respect *Ubuntu* fosters inclusiveness: as Tshoose (2009) notes, this African social philosophy supports the social inclusion of women through two channels: on the one hand several formal and informal women’s organisations ground on the principles of solidarity and we-thinking of *Ubuntu*. On the other hand, the African constitutions (such as that of South Africa) that have been permeated by the values of *Ubuntu* explicitly protect women and declare their equality with men in all the domains of the life. Of course, one may argue that such a constitutional protection is present also in countries characterised by discrimination against
women; nevertheless, the strong link between social inclusion and *Ubuntu* shows that the former is entailed by the latter at least in principle. Consequently this represents a support to my point in this paper (i.e. strengthening and using *Ubuntu* to promote economic performance in Africa). In other words: the premises to promote the African development also through *Ubuntu* exist; the transformation of potency in action is the challenge.

Can we thus assess that social capital and *Ubuntu* are the same? I would say no but I would also say that there are similarities, which render the two concepts operationally – though not theoretically – very similar. Indeed *Ubuntu* is a philosophy, i.e. a way of thinking and a way of considering life, which is part of the culture of a society, which constitutes a part of the set of values commonly shared by a (large) group of people. Social capital is a more individual(istic) concept: each person has his stock of social capital represented by his set of interpersonal relationships and his voluntary participation to the social life of the community. It is clear that *Ubuntu* is more static than social capital: interpersonal relationships constitute a network, whose geometry is variable in time and depends on the decision of the person, while *Ubuntu* is a concept that no single man can modify. Moreover, while social capital and strong ties may coexist, this is not the case for *Ubuntu*, which, in its purest form, entails only weak (though powerful) ties. Both social capital and *Ubuntu* entail networks, where the interpersonal relationships may be either horizontal or vertical. However *Ubuntu* excludes vertical relationships in the sense of a chief who dictatorially decides also for the others. Unfortunately, strong ties are not the only potential shortcoming of *Ubuntu*. As highlighted before, this social philosophy entails a very open democratic process to define the “good” for the group, in a society that is evolving fast and which is abandoning the ancestral set of values for new others.\(^\text{16}\) This strong link between *Ubuntu* and democracy is fundamental: democratic processes are mediators between the individual goals and

\(^{16}\) This is true at least in “developed” contexts such as the big African cities – here considered in contrast with the rural areas.
preferences on the one side and the social good on the other side. In this sense, while each individual has the social welfare as goal, each individual contributes fundamentally to define and to obtain the social welfare. The best way to operationalise Ubuntu is indeed through democratic processes and discussions, aimed at making the social goals to emerge and the individual positions to converge to it and, eventually, to merge. Also decentralising decisions from national governments to local decisional bodies may help to let Ubuntu work.

The combination between low levels of education (typical of Africa), the democratic process of definition of what is good, and some individualistic (or corporative) interests aimed at maximising the rents of small aristocracies is today the most relevant problem that Ubuntu-based policies must face. Lobbies and/or power centres may indeed easily lead the definition of the “good” in such a way that the people choose what is good for the lobbies, convinced that they are choosing what is good for themselves. The recent marketization of the traditional African values observed in South Africa\textsuperscript{17} (McDonald, 2010) is an example of this process. There the traditional social values generated by Ubuntu have been constantly deviated to support neoliberal reforms.

Under this respect, social capital is more resilient: Ubuntu is pervasive of the whole population, which is all linked together within the same network; social capital (especially at macro level) is the sum of several different networks, often interrelated but also independent from each other. In this situation, the interests represented by a network may be contrasted, limited or even annulated by other networks based on dissimilar interests. Once an idea of “good” has entered the social network of Ubuntu, this becomes common to all the people, and is more difficult to be opposed. While one may argue that it is more difficult to “indoctrinate” the whole population rather than the members of a smaller network who share the same interests, this is not impossible in context characterised by low education (such as Africa) and had been possible even in very – relatively –

\textsuperscript{17} That is notably one of the most “modernised” African countries.
educated and developed contexts (the Nazism provides strong evidence for this). This has historically happened, especially when the reforms proposed by the lobbies had very general relevance, such as in the recent neoliberal reforms in South Africa and in the German Nazism. Van Norren (2014) reviews other possible criticism of *Ubuntu* for the development of Africa. Among them its similarity with communism, the possibility that it undermines the rule of law, etc. The author confutes all these, claiming that politics and other policy-makers are using *Ubuntu* as a concept in which framing their proposals rather than embedding it in the policies. However, this is true in theory: *Ubuntu* theoretically promotes ecumenical policies, but it can unfortunately be exploited to protect the interests of few. Another major difference between communism and *Ubuntu* is in the fact that the first theorises the common property of all the production means and the cancellation of the individual property. This is not what *Ubuntu* entails. In the societies based on this social philosophy, individual property rights are granted and protected and there is no known desire to modify this situation. Moreover, all the communist regimes installed authoritarian governments that are unknown to societies based on *Ubuntu*, where decisions are the outcomes of democratic processes, as I will explain in further details in what follows.

Nevertheless the interrelationship between social capital and *Ubuntu* exists and is strict. First, they both contribute to democratise societies: as explained before, democratic decisional processes are a necessary result of *Ubuntu*. In a hierarchical system where the society obeys the decisions of the chief, the social capital funded on weak ties brings democracy through the network of social contact (Sullivan and Transue, 1999), involving in this case more relational than generalised trust. In this hierarchical structure the leadership is exclusive in the sense explained in the previous section, but the leader is nevertheless knot of a network, in which his subordinates are embedded. This implies that the subordinates can let the leader know their opinions through the network. Not only, subordinates who are dissatisfied (perhaps because they think that the leader is not acting in the interest of the society) may enforce social sanctions against him thanks to the network (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). Narayan and Woolcock (2000) go beyond
this and highlight that the extant empirical literature on social capital shows that it is most effective when it engenders and promotes synergies between institutions and the networks present in the society. Indeed, citizens’ social capital facilitates the inclusion of the citizens in the institutions, or, at least, in the institutional decision processes. Consequently, both social capital and Ubuntu have a democratising role in the society. These democratic traits of both Ubuntu and social capital are the fundaments to build a shared concept of what is good for the community in order to minimise defections from the group. The most a decision is shared and supported and the most the leader can be monitored and sanctioned by the subordinates, the least the probabilities of failure and of defection.

Let us consider now the political social capital identified by Putnam (1993). An Ubuntu-man (i.e. a person who lives in accordance with the Ubuntu philosophy) cares about his community and the common good by definition. This means that his level of political participation\(^\text{18}\) – and thus of social capital – is potentially very high. I would stress “potentially” as not always the institutional conditions of a country allow for the (full) exercise of the political rights. This establishes a first link between political social capital and Ubuntu: here the latter causes the first. However the political rights have meaning only within a given community, which can be the council of the village, a political party, or the electoral body. The first two involve high levels of social capital, as they are based on interpersonal links between the members of the group\(^\text{19}\). Here is the link between Ubuntu and associative social capital via the political social capital. When the reference community is the electoral body, the link may be weaker than in the two previous cases, but elections are anyway likely to build and maintain a sense of community at a broad level, and to link the electors to each other through the sense of the state (Raco and Flint, 2001).

\(^{18}\) Of course people living in tribes or in rural villages with traditional structures will participate to the political life of their communities in a different way than the inhabitants of cities or of developed areas. But for the moment this is not a relevant difference.

\(^{19}\) The notion of “interpersonal link is intended in broad sense and is not limited to strong ties, but includes also relationships funded on weak ties (for example those that link members of voluntary associations, Putnam, 1993).
The interrelationship between *Ubuntu* and social capital is thus complex: while the first generates necessarily the second, this latter is a necessary condition for *Ubuntu* to become action: in other words the *Ubuntu* philosophy translates from theory to practice thanks to the interpersonal networks, which constitute the social capital of a community. These are networks of persons belonging to the community, who are interconnected to each other. The condition of “member” is not innate, to the extent that the participation to social activities and the intensity of this participation are chosen by each member of the community, who decides, therefore, the relevance he wishes to assume within the network. This amounts to say that each person has different importance within the network, but the discussion on this issue is left to a future paper. What is relevant here is the value of the networks in the process of translating *Ubuntu* from Aristotelian potency to action. The necessary individual willingness to become member of a network and the choice about the value to give to this person through the number and the intensity of the connections to other people constitute another important issue. On the one hand *Ubuntu* is a cultural value, taught to the people of sub-Saharan populations since childhood; on the other, this would remain potency without a voluntary and conscious action of each individual. This action necessarily generates and maintains social capital at both individual and social level. Eventually this social capital is the means through which *Ubuntu* allows the community of individuals to pursue the common goals.

At this point, one may claim that also social capital is embedded in the society, as this form of capital cannot exist outside a group of people (forming a society). Therefore, one might conclude that social capital is not different from *Ubuntu* under this respect. While the first assertion is undoubtedly true, as social capital is a social phenomenon as its name suggests, the conclusion that follows this claim is false. There are at least two reasons for this. First social capital requires a positive action from a certain number of individuals to exist. In other words, for any given definition of social capital (taken as voluntary membership to associations, political
participation, etc.), each member of the society has to implement some positive action that depends on his free will and – as such – is not necessary. Associating to a group, voting, participating to social activities entail a previous individual decision to act to form and join and association, to go and vote, etc. In this sense, once born, each individual may or may not establish the relationships that increase the individual and the collective amount of social capital. A person born in an Ubuntu-based society lives immediately in a context characterised by the norms of Ubuntu, without any positive action. There is no individual positive will to enter the Ubuntu society. Of course, a member may decide to leave it, taking – in this case – the decision of executing a negative action. This is the first difference: at the initial state of the world social capital needs a positive action to be created and increased, while Ubuntu requires a negative action. Of course, in subsequent stages, a person may break a social tie (negative action that decreases social capital) and a person may decide to embrace the principles of Ubuntu (positive action that increases the number of people who follow this philosophy). The second difference in the sign of variation of the amount of social capital and of Ubuntu as consequence of the individual action. For sure social capital increases whenever a person establishes new social relationships or participates to political events. At the same time, when a person breaks some relationship, the individual and collective social capital decreases. What happens to Ubuntu is less clear. On the one side, it is a philosophy (i.e. theoretical superstructure) and – as such – it exists in the same quantity independently of the number of people who follow it. Atomism exists even if today it counts perhaps no follower. On the other side, the society left by the individual who acted negatively looses a member and – with him – a part of itself. However, the individual decisions may only increase or decrease the size of an Ubuntu society, without altering the quantity (if any) of Ubuntu that exists. Instead, the quantity and the existence of social capital depend on the number of people who freely decide to establish interpersonal relationships and to participate to political events.
The concepts of sympathy and empathy described and discussed in section 2 offer the possibility of going deeper in our discussion. There I argue that an Ubuntu-man is necessarily both sympathetic and empathic. Let us now consider the relationship between these two feelings and social capital. Consider a person endowed with both associative and political social capital; is this individual empathic? The answer is yes. Indeed if he decided to become member of a network, this entails that he shares the ethical preferences of that network, otherwise either he would not have entered it, or he would have been expelled soon. Is this person also sympathetic? I.e. does this person choose in conformity with the group’s ethical preferences? The answer here is: likely yes, but it depends on how the group is able to punish opportunistic behaviours and on the extent to which the ethical preferences reflect true group goals and not common individual goals. The difference between the two is subtle, but relevant: a group goal is an objective which can be reached only by the group as a unique agent, and not by each of its members as separate agents; a common individual goal is an individualistic result which can be attained by each member of the community only through it, but which does not entail any advantage for the group as “unique agent”. An example can help to clarify this distinction. First consider an oligopoly: each of its members aims at maximising its profits, no matter the sum of the profits of the group, but the oligopolistic structure is necessary to each oligopolist to reach the goal. This is an example of what I call “common individual goal”. Consider a team of synchronised swimmers: here the goal is a true group goal, and this can not be reached by each member of the team individually. In the first case the members share the same ethical preference, but take advantage of the community, and, if this is not able to punish opportunistic behaviours, the strongest member can prevail and constitute a monopoly; in other words a non-co-operator may take advantage from the others’ cooperation. In the second case this would not be possible. In the first case each member can behave sympathetically or not, in the second case sympathy is the only possible choice, under the assumption that all the members of the team pursue the goal of winning the gold.
medal. As a conclusion while *Ubuntu* promotes and involves both sympathy and empathy, social capital is likely to do the same, but it is not always the case. This interpretation suggests that while *Ubuntu* always involves social capital, this last may not necessarily involve *Ubuntu*. However, we can assess that the social capital related to *Ubuntu* is of the good type, while that which is not linked to *Ubuntu* is of the bad (bonding) type (on good and bad social capital, see Adler and Kwon, 2000).

A fundamental issue at this point is to understand the environmental conditions, which render social capital and *Ubuntu* able to produce outcomes of the “good type.” With respect to social capital, the literature is almost unanimous in recognising that weak ties never produce bad outcomes, which are generally the product of strong ties. With respect to *Ubuntu*, the research has hardly focussed on this issue. Therefore, some more discussion is needed here. *Ubuntu* creates ties between the members of a society; moreover, the sanctions for the violators of the social norms based on *Ubuntu* are more similar to those hitting the violators of a system based on strong ties than of a system based on weak ties. From this consideration, we could infer that *Ubuntu* generates ties of strong rather than of weak type. This may be true, but there is a fundamental difference between *Ubuntu* and social capital, which renders strong ties responsible for different outcomes. Social capital based on weak ties is the result of an individual and voluntary process of accumulation of interpersonal relationships. In particular, the individual is fully responsible for choosing to become member of a group characterised by weak ties (examples of these groups are friends, acquaintances, members of associations, etc.). Social capital based on strong ties is less a choice of the individual; strong ties are typically familial ties or links supported by power relationships, breaking which may produce severe sanctions (as in the mafias). Similarly to this second situation, also the ties based on *Ubuntu* are not a choice of the person. Individuals are born

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20 In reality there are examples of teams where defecting from the rules (ethical values) may maximise the profit of the defector. However, under the hypothesis that all the members of the team are embedded in an *Ubuntu* culture, following its values necessarily implies behaving sympathetically with the other members of the team.
and grow up in Ubuntu-based societies or not. They can choose to leave these societies, but this choice is extremely costly. So far social capital based on strong ties and Ubuntu seem to be extremely similar, yet there is a fundamental difference. The groups linked by social capital based on strong ties are generally small (families or mafia clans), while the values of Ubuntu are common to millions of people living in a broad area. While the interests of small groups may clash with those of the broader community, in which these groups are included, the populations, whose social structures are based on Ubuntu, are the broad community. In the most of the cases, the Ubuntu community is the universal community for the Ubuntu individual, while this is never the case for a person embedded in a group bonded by strong ties in a system based on social capital. The consequence of this is that this last type of groups pursue private interests and goals, while the Ubuntu communities pursue public and social goals. In the first case, the community may be damaged by the behaviour of the group; in the second case, the group and the society coincide and so do the interests pursued.

A relevant question now is whether Ubuntu promotes social capital based on weak ties (or vice versa). For sure the social capital based on weak ties enhances Ubuntu. Indeed, the interpersonal connections that characterise this type of social capital engender (or at least support) the individual sense of belonging to a community. When a person is member of a network and is aware of this, then he is and feels part of the network (that is a society) and knows that the survival and the strength of this network depend on the behaviour of the members. If the people work together for the support and the strength of the network, then each of them has incentive to we-think rather than to I-think. Social capital can therefore promote Ubuntu. In this case the sense of community derives rather from political social capital. An example may clarify this: political elections (as well as referenda) are mass events, where all the members of a society act individually for the interest of the community. In such events the electors cast their vote for the party that best represents their vision for the relevant society (municipality, region, country, etc.).
Strengthening social capital fosters we-thinking and, as a consequence, may reinforce and revitalise the values of *Ubuntu*. Is the reverse mechanism possible? We can argue that the we-thinking naturally generated by *Ubuntu* makes the members of a society to feel linked to the other members of the same society in what we call “community” and to work for benefitting it. Again, in a political context *Ubuntu* may enhance participation to elections, as these are part of the social life and serve to pursue the common good. Moreover, as I have highlighted before, the extant literature on *Ubuntu* generally belies the risk that people could vote to maximise the rent of a particular group instead of that of the society. Therefore, social capital and *Ubuntu* promote and are strictly related to one another.

At this point a caveat is needed. Bonding social capital may lead to distorted uses of the values of *Ubuntu*, especially it is not complemented with bridging forms of social capital (Woolcock, 1998). Interest groups are generally based on strong ties (i.e. bonding social capital) and usually try to subdue the environment to their goals, which often have detrimental outcomes for the non-members of the group. These lobbies may therefore use their social capital to distort the values of *Ubuntu* or to use them for their interests. An example may help to understand this point better. Consider ethnic conflicts in Africa: if the leaders of some group A have interests in gaining power through conflicting against the rival group B, they may convince the members of their group that their survival is linked to the suppression of the rival (the ethnic massacres in Rwanda and Burundi are a typical example of this). They may, subtly, convince the members of their group that the “others” have betrayed the values of *Ubuntu*, as they (group B) behave in contrast to the As’ interests (for example because they helped the colonial government, or because they control some economic sector, are richer, etc.). At this point, since the Bs are outside the society as they betrayed the common good, the As have the right to fight against them. Again, the challenge for the future is to use *Ubuntu* and social capital to enhance democracy and accountability in order to avoid these distortive uses. Indeed, strong ties are not necessarily a
monotonic function of social distance. In other words, they do not necessarily weaken as we move from the close-knit family to extended kinship ties, to friendship and neighborly liaisons, to feeling part of the same community, country or racial/ethnic group. They can also depend on how strongly one identifies with the objectives of a collective, including lobbies and corrupted power groups.

However, some forms of strong ties are of extreme importance in maintaining Ubuntu alive in the society. For instance, the family offers the basis of individuals’ socialization and the inculcation of the society’s norms. It can help individuals develop bridging ties, if it encourages and supports its offspring to seek opportunity outside the family confines. Therefore, whether individuals have the capacity to develop weaker ties is not a purely voluntary process and depends also on the resources, economic and non-economic, inherited by the family. Also in this sense, Ubuntu may foster the creation of social capital. Moreover, it is noteworthy that familial ties may also foster social capital in its bridging form. Children with parents with strong social and political involvement and with many interpersonal relationships may be incentivised to replicate their parents’ behaviour in their adulthood.

5. **Ubuntu, individualism and utilitarianism**

It is perhaps necessary a brief reflection on the relationships between Ubuntu on the one side and individualism and utilitarianism on the other. In the second section, I claimed that Ubuntu incorporates individualism. This happens as individuals living in an Ubuntu-based society are inextricable parts of the society itself: they do not exist outside their society. Therefore, for each individual, pursuing the interests of the community coincides with pursuing the self’s interests. In other word, when these have been defined following the complex path described before in this paper, the individual’s and the society’s interests coincide and the first aims at implementing all the personal

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21 I thank an anonymous referee for this comment.
actions that allow him to reach the communitarian goal. This identification of interests and objectives results in Ubuntu absorbing individualism. In this sense, one may claim that this last concept ceases to exit; however, this is not the case: each individual continues operating in the society for the good of both the community and of himself. The perfect superposition between them does not exclude their individual existence. The point here is the fusion between the social and the individual levels of interest, decision and action. Once more, I would like to stress that the decisional process highlights both the existence and the convergence of different visions and positions at personal level. The force of the Ubuntu ethics allows for syncretising them in a common and shared view.

A similar reasoning is possible when we analyse the relationships between Ubuntu and utilitarianism. On the one hand, this does not exclude neither individualism nor the existence of social goals shared by the individuals. Indeed, the utilitarian view of the classical economics thought survives also in Ubuntu-based contexts. One may easily claim that the social goals pursued by the society are utilitarian in the sense that the decisional process of each community is led by the will of maximising the society’s utility. This is valid also in a society funded on Ubuntu. Indeed, there is no reason why such a society should not want to maximise its utility. Therefore, assuming utility maximisation as a goal, we can claim that also Ubuntu societies are utilitarian in the classical sense. Moreover, in the light of what discussed before about the relationship between the individuals and the society, we can conclude that also the individuals maximise their utility. The point here is not a difference between the classical economics theories and Ubuntu, as if this last would open different perspectives or lead to revolutionary economic theories. Ubuntu is a complex of social norms that allows for transposing utilitarianism from an individualistic to a social level, without losing the relevance of the individuals, but also melting all the individualities in a common, shared and collective set of actions and goals. In other words, what Ubuntu adds to the classical economics theory is the possibility of operating a transition between these two levels. In other words, the social norms of Ubuntu are a way to 1) aggregate individual preferences in social preferences and 2) reach a
collective decision through a way, which is different but not less effective, than the traditional voting mechanisms.

The reflections presented in this section allow understanding that *Ubuntu* society are not based on principles different from the known bases of the classical economics theory; rather, the social norms based on this philosophy are an alternative road to the same destination. Also for this reason, I believe that *Ubuntu* – if correctly understood, used and enhanced – may represent a way to economic growth and social development. At this point, it is worth noting that though Harsanyi (1955) claims that subjective preferences can reflect egoistic or altruistic attitudes, he opts for individualistic value judgements whereby the social welfare function can be represented by the sum of individual utilities. This means that social choice becomes dependent on the individual interests directly affected, leaving no room for separate interests of a super-individual state or of impersonal cultural values.\(^\text{22}\) However, in the *Ubuntu* vision, at the end of the democratic process leading to the individuation of the social goal and of the common way to reach it, the individual interests have melt in the social interest and this process of convergence and melting is driven by the shared cultural values. In Harsanyi’s view the super-individual values are cancelled by the process of creation of the social welfare function; in the *Ubuntu* world, this last is reached by a process conformed to the super-individual values. Once again, *Ubuntu* opens paths that are alternative to those proposed by the classical economics theory, but lead the same objectives (utility maximization, welfare maximization, etc.).

6. Conclusions

This paper analyses and discusses the relationships between *Ubuntu* and social capital, which appear strongly interrelated. The recent economic literature shows that social capital enhances development and growth, and therefore it should be promoted, especially in those countries, where the economic development is hindered by a poor social context. Indeed social capital seems to be

\(^{22}\) I thank an anonymous referee for highlighting this.
beneficial for the economy through the promotion and the strengthening of social cohesion. This would both diminish the transaction costs on almost all the markets (through inducing interpersonal trust) and increase the popular control on the governments, rendering these less prone to opportunistic behaviours. This paper shows that the Ubuntu philosophy entails and promotes social capital, and that this last is necessary for the first. Ubuntu is a sub-Saharan philosophy, this means that it characterises the populations of countries in severe economic distress.

The discussion presented in this article suggests the existence of complex relationships between social capital, Ubuntu and social ties. As discussed in section 4, some type of strong ties (namely the familial bonds) may incentivise the young individuals both to accumulate social capital and to adhere to the Ubuntu values. However, both these and social capital are likely to have positive effects at social level, when they are able to create, support and replicate weak ties. The relationship between interpersonal ties on the one hand and social capital and Ubuntu on the other hand may take the form of a spiral process that produces the first and spreads the values of the second relying on both strong and weak ties. Moreover, both social capital and Ubuntu are responsible for the maintenance of old weak ties and for the formation of new (see Migheli, 2011). In this respect, it is impossible to disentangle completely the contribution of the ties to social capital and Ubuntu and that of these latter to the formation and maintenance of the ties. The process involves highly endogenous forces, and further research is needed to shed more light on them and on the processes that interact between social norms and interpersonal ties both at individual and at social level.

The past regimes in South Africa and Namibia and the current in many other African countries have depleted large amounts of social capital, creating diffidence among the populations. The recovery and the promotion of Ubuntu as both an element of African identity and as a socio-economic instrument for the development are perhaps necessary steps in the African voyage towards development and peace. In addition Ubuntu could help the populations actually living under authoritarian regimes to open the path to democracy. However, as van Norren (2014) points out, the
African politicians and policymakers are far from really implementing the values of *Ubuntu* in their actions. They rather use it as a flagship, but then they continue to defend the interests of their clans. The challenge for the future is then to find incentives for politicians and policymakers to embed the very true values of this African social philosophy in their actions. In addition to this, it is and will be crucial to make all the citizens feel that the “group” is represented by the country (or even by a vaster area) and not by familistic, tribal or ethno-linguistic groups.

In sum the paper shows that *Ubuntu* is a valuable cultural trait which should be seriously considered and promoted by both responsible governments and international institutions aiming at enhancing the sub-Saharan Africa’s development. The ways to promote *Ubuntu* in African societies are numerous. The strong interrelationship and the complex causality, which link this social philosophy and social capital allow for enhancing *Ubuntu* through the promotion of social capital and vice-versa. In some sense there exists a sort of double spiral process that increases social capital starting from *Ubuntu* and, in turn, fosters social capital through *Ubuntu*. A first way that the African governments may follow is increasing the political participation of the populations: this requires a democratisation of the incumbent systems, but, as I have discussed in this article, *Ubuntu* roots on democratic processes. *Ubuntu* (as well as social capital) helps the democratic development of a society and therefore prepares fertile ground for itself. Democratic systems allow discussion about problems that are relevant for the society and allow the society to pursue its goals though its representatives. As Sen (2005) notes, no democratic country has known starvation in modern and recent times. However, social capital and *Ubuntu* may also start some process of democratisation. If they are sufficiently spread within the population, they may create the conditions for the formation of democratic movements that might, in the end, overthrow dictatorial regimes (the African National Congress is an example of this). *Ubuntu* and social capital may therefore been promoted by spontaneous citizens’ associations, enlightened politicians, political parties, etc. Africa offers a unique combination of *Ubuntu* and social capital that can be integrated to strengthen each other in the
process of social and economic development. One might now wonder why a continent endowed with this positive mix hosts some of the least developed countries in the world. The answer is that the social capital based on strong ties is currently prevailing on that based on weak ties in the most of Africa today. The positive values of Ubuntu should be used by all the people who want to change the current situation to start the virtuous process of creation of bridging social capital from Ubuntu and for spreading the values of Ubuntu through the bridging social capital. Democracy, accountability of policy makers, and the rule of law promoted by the values of Ubuntu supported by and supporting bridging social capital are the fundamentals of socio-economic systems that enhance the people’s well-being. The best form of economic system may of course vary from country to country, according to circumstances, preferences, traditions, etc.

Last but not least, I would like to stress that Ubuntu oversteps national borders and may therefore facilitate international negotiations and appease conflicts and tensions between countries in the name of the common good. However the analysis of this issue would be long and is therefore left to further research.
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